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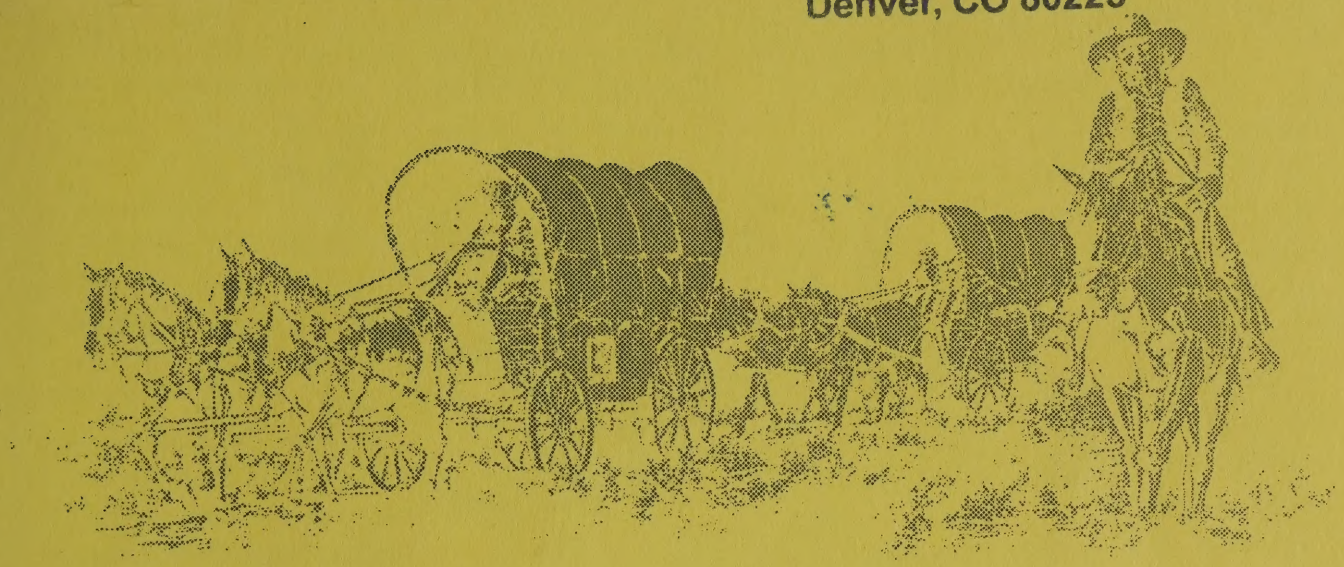

'49ers - on the Green River

~ Adventures in the Past ~

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'49ers on the Green River

Great events in the history of the American West are often viewed as one happening, the Gold Rush to California in 1849 for example. Gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill, the news spread like wildfire in the United States, and a lot folks headed west. Some by sea... some by land. Some folks got rich... some didn't.

However, the story of the Gold Rush is really a huge collection of individual stories. Every man, woman, and child who came west had an adventure to tell his or her descendants later in life. Each person's account is a part of the whole that makes the history of the west so fascinating. William Lewis Manly's experiences in southwestern Wyoming's Sweetwater Country and subsequent adventures are one of those obscure tales.

Manly was born in Vermont in 1820. He moved with his family to Ohio in 1827 and like so many Americans of the time, his family continued to drift around - to Michigan, Wisconsin, and then on to Maine - in search of better land and living conditions. In the course of his travels, Manly turned his hand at quite a few different jobs- trapper, farmer, railsplitter, bullwacker.

Like thousands of Americans in the winter of 1848-49, Manly heard the **NEWS** and decided to take the Overland Route to California in search of gold. And like most of the folks on the Trail, he was in a hurry to get there and make his fortune, so, he joined a mixed group of soldiers and emigrants at St. Joseph, Missouri and headed west on the Trail.

Later in life, he wrote a book, *Death Valley in '49*, which tells what happened. *"When we came to the first water that flowed toward the Pacific coast at Pacific Springs, we drivers had quite a little talk about a new scheme. We put a great many "ifs" together and they amounted to about this: If this stream were large enough; if we had a boat; if we knew the way; if there were no falls or bad places; if we had plenty of provisions; if we were bold enough to set out on such a trip, etc., we might come out at some point or other on the Pacific Ocean. And now when we came to the first of the "ifs," a stream large enough to float a small boat, we began to think more strongly about the other if."* [Pacific Springs is northeast of Rock Springs, just west of the Continental Divide.]

When their party arrived at the banks of the Green River, fate intervened. Sitting on a sandbar, filled with sand, was a ferry boat. After putting the boat back into shape, the entire party ferried across the river and had a meeting. The time had come for decisions. The soldiers would

split off to the northwest headed for Oregon, the emigrants would continue southwest towards Salt Lake City and eventually California. William Manly, with six other men, decided to try the river route.

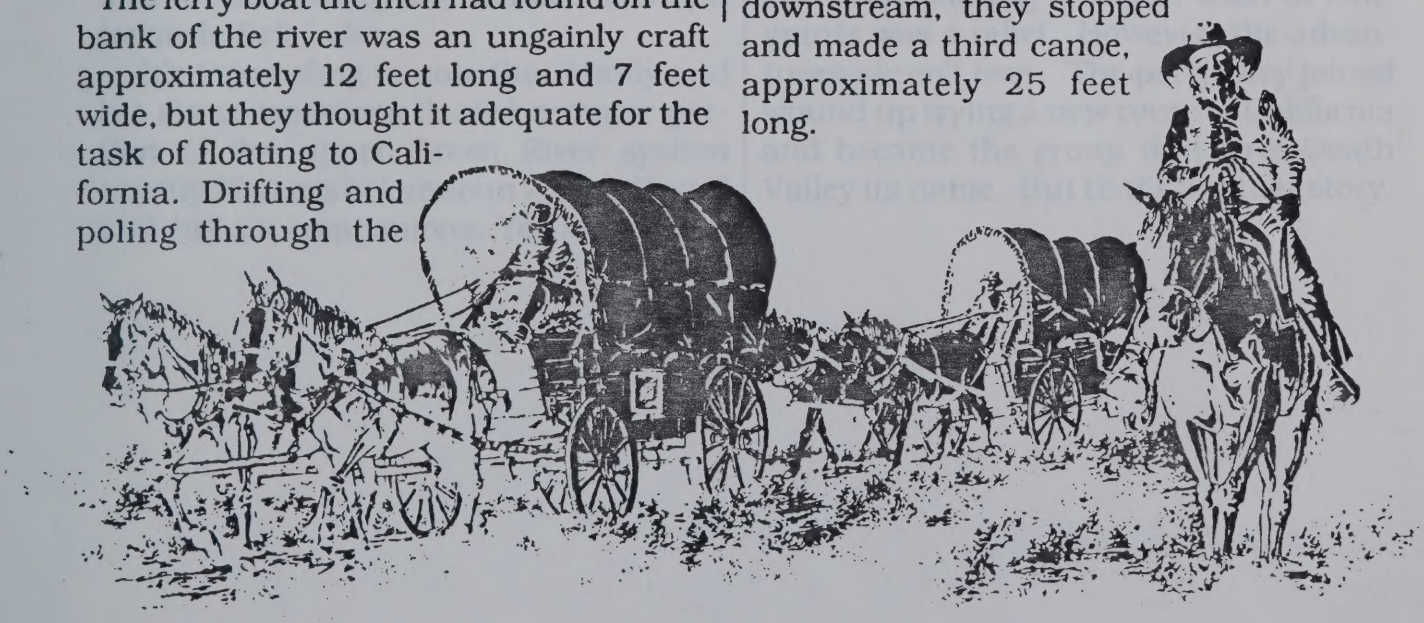
"...So we parted company ... Each company wished the other good luck, and we then set to work in earnest to carry out our plans." Manly's next words have become something of a tradition among modern river running historians, *"...All our worldly goods were piled up on the bank, and we were alone."*

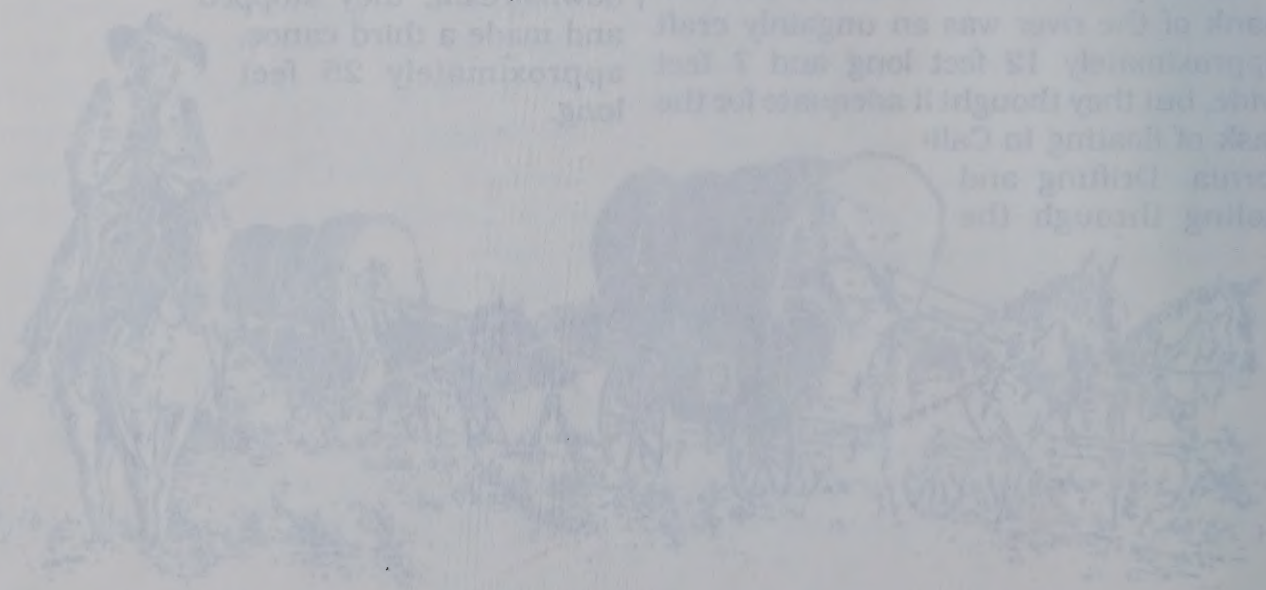
Standing on the west bank of the Green River on August 5, 1849, Manly and his six companions watched the soldiers and emigrant party disappear into the distance. Having split off from the main group in lieu of the "river" route to California, the men made preparations to begin their descent down the Green. In addition to Manly, the band of adventurers included John Rogers, Richard Field, brothers Charles and Joseph Hazelrig, M.S. McMahon, and Alfred Walton. Because of his travels and confident manner, Manly was elected captain of the group.

The ferry boat the men had found on the bank of the river was an ungainly craft approximately 12 feet long and 7 feet wide, but they thought it adequate for the task of floating to California. Drifting and poling through the Green River valley and the Firehole country proved a leisurely trip. The men shot game, fished, and were generally pleased with their decision to abandon the dusty, overland route. Manly described, *"...I went on shore and sighted a couple of antelope, one of which I shot, which gave us good grub, and good appetites we already had. As near as we could estimate we floated about thirty miles a day, which beat the pace of tired oxen considerably ... Thus far we had a very pleasant time, each taking his turn in working the boat while the others rested or slept."*

The further they floated, though, the swifter the current became. In one spot above the upper Flaming Gorge, Manly was tossed out of the boat when the pole he was using jammed between two rocks. And as the current increased, so did the towering mountain walls until they were deep in the Flaming Gorge.

At Ashley Falls, the worst rapid in the Gorge, the men lost their boat when it was pinned on a large boulder. Working day and night, the men chopped down two pine trees, fashioned them into rough canoes, lashed them together and started out again. After going just a short ways downstream, they stopped and made a third canoe, approximately 25 feet long.





The party floated through Red Canyon, Brown's Park, and the Canyon of Lodore in what is now Utah and Colorado. The smaller canoes flipped in a rapid in Lodore and the men lost all their arms except one rifle and one shotgun. Alfred Walton was nearly drowned. By lining their canoes around the worst rapids, they eventually made it through Lodore, Whirlpool, and Split Mountain Canyons.

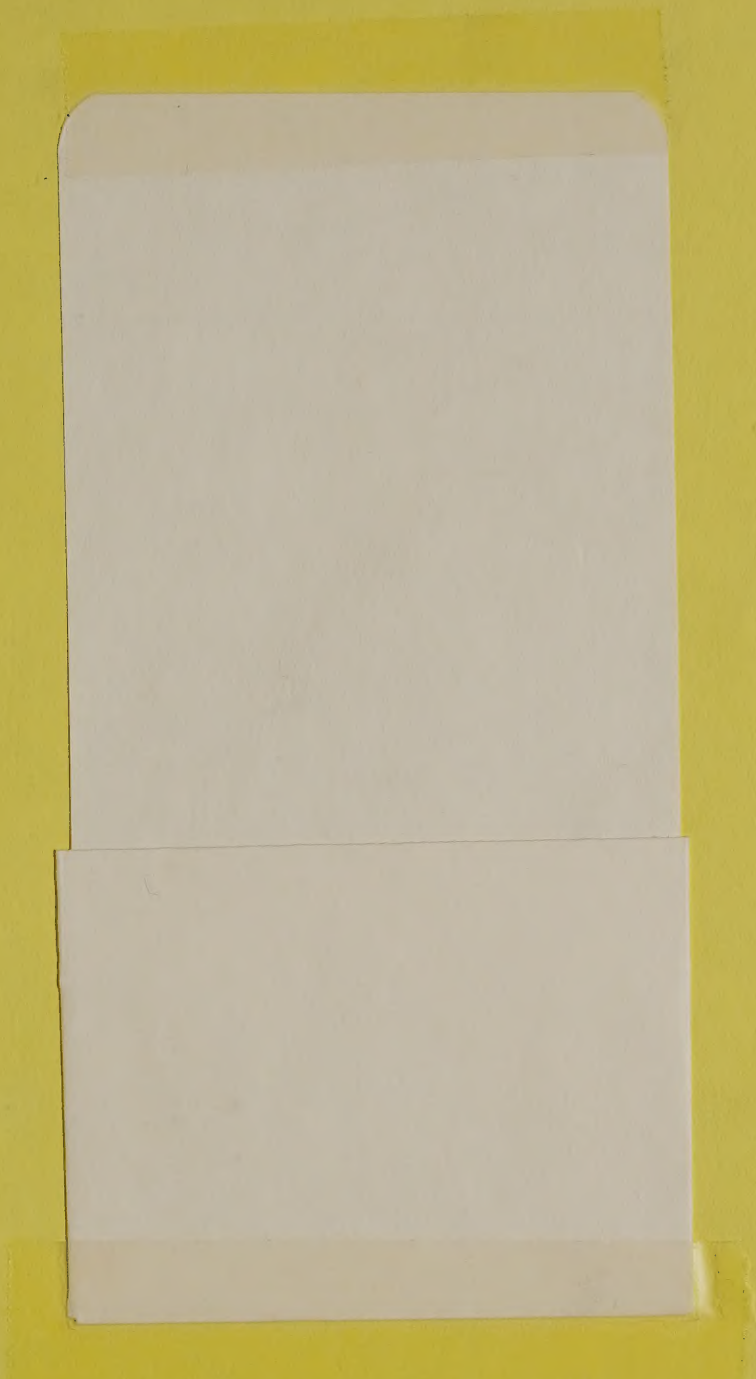
> ***"...All our worldly goods were piled up on the bank, and we were alone."*** **William Manly, 1849 on the Green River**

In Ashley Valley, the group met the famous Ute Chief Wakara (or Walker) who persuaded them that further travel down the Green River would be fatal. There the party split- McMahon and Field didn't trust Chief Walker and decided to continue down the river. The Ute Chief's words proved true as McMahon and Field had to abandon the river in Desolation Canyon and wound up walking overland back to Wyoming. They eventually made it to Salt Lake City in December 1849, via Fort Bridger. Manly and the remaining four headed overland towards Salt Lake.

It's interesting to note that Manly and his six companions floated a major portion of the upper Green River system exactly 20 years before John Wesley Powell and his six companions. Yet Manly was still not the first. William Ashley and a group of trappers descended the Green in 1825, fur trapper Denis Julien left a legacy of carvings on the canyons of the Green in the late 1830's to the early 1840's, and an unknown party of travelers preceded Manly in 1848 or 49.

Stumbling into Utah Valley after a hard route from the Uinta Basin, Manly and his companions met up with a group of emigrants headed to California. By one of those unexplained coincidences, he met the Bennett wagon - people he had been trying to overtake since leaving Missouri. The Bennett's were even carrying some of his possessions - a gun, several shirts, and other provisions. Manly and Rogers joined the group and once again started off to complete their journey to California.

After their experiences floating the Green River, meeting Chief Walker, and walking overland across the high deserts of eastern Utah, joining a wagon train of emigrants was a relief. However, the adventures weren't over. The party they joined wound up trying a new route to California and became the group that gave Death Valley its name. But that's another story.



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